



Engaging Youth in Policymaking Improves Policies and Youth Outcomes

By Heather Balas, California Center for Civic Participation

Introduction

"I would like to stress the importance of including the perspectives of adolescents like us in the policymaking process. In doing so, laws will be written for youth, with youth," said 18-year-old Lauren de Leon, a high school senior from Los Angeles.

Lauren, along with other teens from throughout California, held a briefing at the state capitol last spring to share youths' views with policymakers and legislative advocates. The event is one example of the many ways that young people throughout California are getting involved in public policy. Despite youths' abilities and willingness to help formulate policies, policymakers typically overlook this resource. More than 300 youth-related bills were introduced during the most recent session of the California legislature. In most cases, lawmakers drafted and voted on these youth bills without seeking any feedback from young people.

This policy brief demonstrates that well-prepared youth not only *can* contribute effectively to the state policymaking process, but that policymakers and administrators *have an obligation* to enable them to do so. This claim will be supported by several policymaker interviews,¹ as well as a case study of a California Center for Civic Participation (California Center) youth group that is targeting teen pregnancy prevention policies.

Youth Improve Public Policies

Public policies affecting teens are stronger and more on target when youth are consulted. In the same way that finance legislation would never become law without input from the commerce lobby, youth-related policies are informed by youths' viewpoints. Even policies not typically thought of as "youth issues"—such as land use or the environment—can benefit from youth input. Whether considering state legislation, the implementation of government programs, or local school policies, youth bring different insights and viewpoints to the table.

"Youth add a freshness of perspective; they give real life suggestions on how we can improve our world," said Delaine Eastin, former California Superintendent of Public Instruction, who noted that when she was an assemblywoman she had sponsored legislation developed by teens. "Some people don't take youth seriously, but I like to point out that, during the American Revolution, many of our nation's founders were in their teens or early twenties, including Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison."

How to Involve Youth in Policy

Invite Youth to:

- Help draft and revise legislation
- Testify before committees
- Serve on boards, task forces
- Participate in policy conferences and meetings



The Results:

- Stronger, more effective public policies
- Policies that take into account the views and life experiences of youth—an often under represented constituency
- More innovative thinking among policymakers, due to the influence of new ideas
- Heightened understanding of youth perspectives by policymakers
- Greater faith in the democratic system by youth
- Improved leadership, critical thinking, and public speaking skills by youth

2 Policy's Role in Prevention

Involve Youth Early in the Legislative Process

Eastin is not alone in her receptivity to youth participation in the legislative process. Several officials interviewed for this brief observed that youth participation in the legislative process is most helpful *early* in the session when bills are being drafted.²

For example, State Senator John Vasconcellos invited early youth input for his school violence bill, SB1667, which became law in September 2002. Two Oakland youths voiced several ideas that became part of the law, including peer counseling, building authentic self-esteem, and focusing more on preventive measures instead of adding security equipment. The two youths were Ronald Cooper and Marcus Rice of the Youth Alive program, Teens on Target.

Invite Youth Testimony

After bills are drafted, committee testimony is another way to ensure that teens' views are not overlooked. For example, more than 79 teens from the Bay Area group Youth Force Coalition traveled to San Diego in May 2001 to testify before the California Board of Corrections. They successfully convinced the board to reverse its decision to allocate resources for a new "super jail" juvenile hall in Alameda County.

Youth testimony was also sought by State Senator Dede Alpert's office in spring 2001 for SB 515, which would have established a statewide advisory council on youth programs. California Center youth Maya deVertevis, age 19, urged the California Senate Health and Human Services Committee to support the bill, but to amend it so that its council contained designated youth seats. Others echoed the concern, and the bill was changed to designate five youth seats.³

Create Youth Seats on Boards

In addition to contributing good ideas to the legislative process, teens make excellent members of boards and task forces that advise or implement public policies. A key plank of the California Adolescent Health Collaborative's 2000 strategic plan urges governments to involve youth in policymaking through hearings, boards, commissions, and community asset mapping.⁴ Youth often make the best contributions when they are placed in groups of two or more so that they feel more confident. They also excel when the adults receive some training on how to best collaborate with youth. Often, adults who work with youth become better board members, have more fun, and become more creative in their own approaches to board decisions.

The California Board of Education provides a useful example of youth on boards. Since 1983, it has included a permanent student member with full voting and participation rights. The high school senior is selected annually through a highly competitive process. The 2001–2002 youth board member, Erika Goncalves, is particularly proud of her efforts regarding standardized testing. During her service, the board selected a new standardized testing contractor. Erika was one of only two members who voted against the contractor because she felt the firm did not prioritize communication with students—leaving students to view the tests as punishment. As a result of her "no" vote, she was included afterward in several conversations and conference calls to address her

concerns. Ultimately, the firm agreed to improve its communication with students and parents—perhaps through pamphlets to be issued in the schools. "With only a year on the board, you can't change the world," commented Goncalves. "But you can make a difference on a few issues you care about and, in some way, your voice will always be there."

The School Health Connections (SHC) program offers another example. An effort of the California Departments of Education and Health Services, SHC involves youth as participants in several of its annual meetings. Teens participate in working groups alongside analysts and staffers. They also develop policy priorities, which they present as a delegation to the adult attendees. Caroline Roberts, Department of Education SHC administrator, noted, "In the midst of 60 adults talking philosophically about how things *should be*, the youth step in and say, 'This is how it *is* and how we suggest fixing it.' That feedback reminds us that youth participation isn't just needed for legislation—it is really valuable in policy groups and meetings where new ideas are formulating."

Ask Youth to Speak at Conferences

Large-scale state and regional policy conferences provide another vehicle for involving youth in policy development. For example, the Foundation Consortium supports youth delegations in many of its events, including the Pilots to Policy Conferences and Policymakers Institutes. These gatherings of local and state decision makers focus on a range of issues including health care, public safety, and collaboration among cities and school districts. Conference organizer Maura Keaney of *i.e.* Communications noted, "Youth really ground the issues. They keep adults from getting too wrapped up in the theoretical aspects of policy and remind us why we are really here."

Involvement in Policymaking Good for Healthy Youth Development

Involving youth in policy is one of several strategies gaining support within the youth development movement. The Forum for Youth Investment, a leading national youth organization, identifies five key areas essential for healthy youth development:⁵

Five Key Areas Essential for Healthy Youth Development

1. **Learning** (developing the intellect)
2. **Thriving** (being physically healthy)
3. **Connecting** (cultivating social and collaborative skills)
4. **Working** (developing vocational and practical skills)
5. **Leading** (including civic involvement)

Four of these five areas are addressed directly via youth participation in policy—teens develop critical thinking skills, learn to connect and collaborate with others in their community, hone practical abilities such as public speaking, and develop leadership skills.

Thus, while youth participation in policy is good for *policy*, it is also good for the *teens themselves*—honing the next generation of voters, local leaders, and policymakers.

Barriers and Solutions to Youth Involvement

While there are many benefits to youth participation, several barriers do exist. The four biggest barriers—stereotypes, training, school policies, and logistics—are discussed below.

Stereotypes: Eliminate Misconceptions That Youth Cannot Contribute

Some adults doubt whether youth have the knowledge or maturity to contribute to public policy. At the same time, some youth distrust adults or doubt their abilities to relate to teen life. Most people with experience believe that the best solution to these problems is exposure. The more that youth experience positive interactions with adults, including policymakers, the more trust and confidence they will place in them. Similarly, as adults encounter committed youth with good ideas, their own resistance subsides. “Anytime you do things a new way—like bring teenagers into an adult meeting—people are a little uncomfortable,” said SHC’s Caroline Roberts. “But after the second or third time, people get over their discomfort and focus on the benefits.”

Training: Provide More Opportunities to Prepare Youth

Before youth can effectively participate in policy, they must receive training. The few circumstances when policymakers justifiably doubt the value of youth input occur when teens are placed in situations for which they are unprepared. For example, no youth should be asked to serve on a board until she or he understands how it works, the types of decisions it makes, and the responsibilities of the board members. Similarly, youth speakers who lack grounding in all sides of their issue can look like puppets reading a script—a perception that only hinders the youth participation movement. It is important that youth are knowledgeable enough to feel comfortable answering questions and discussing issues in depth.

Training and on-going support address these problems. A number of youth organizations provide good “hands-on” training as well as curricula. (See the resources section on page 4.) The case study on page 5 presents a nonpartisan advocacy-training model used by the California Center. Policymakers can partner with youth organizations to ensure that youth are well prepared before they are placed in a policy meeting or hearing.

Policymaker Strategies to Strengthen Youth Policies

- **Involve** youth in the drafting of bills.
- **Invite** youth testimony on bills that have already been drafted.
- **Create** youth seats on government boards, commissions, and task forces.
- **Create** youth advisory committees in home districts on a range of issues.
- **Invite** youth delegations to policy conferences.
- **Establish** annual youth hearings for each legislative committee considering teen legislation.

School Policies: Allow More Flexibility to Excuse Students From Class

Increasingly, schools resist excusing students from class even for something as valuable as traveling to the state capitol. Greater focus on standardized tests and academic standards—which do not focus on state or local government—make it difficult for even the best students to be excused from school. Further, school funding comes in part from student attendance. If a student is absent from school, even for an approved academically enriching activity, the school loses money—on average \$30 a day per student.⁶

The challenge increases when organizations target nontraditional leaders who are not necessarily “A” students. For example, the struggling student may provide the best insight into how to improve her school, but she will also be the last one excused from class to tell policymakers her ideas. “There is an old perception that civic participation or service learning will take youth away from their studies,” said former Superintendent Eastin. “But we know that students involved in service are more likely to do better in school because they connect academics with the real world of citizenship.”

In addition to the issue of excusing students from class, it is equally important to consider what youth are learning *in class* about their government. The Content Standards for California Public Schools do not call for education on local or state government until 12th grade, and even then, this component is one of sixteen democracy and economic concepts to be presented in a school year. The standards do call for a strong emphasis on federal government, but the nature of federal policy affords far fewer opportunities for citizen participation. State Senator John Vasconcellos notes, “Civics classes just don’t provide the information students need to feel engaged in the process. And even if teachers were able to provide more information, this type of knowledge comes best by doing it—not just reading a book.”

Logistics: Make it Easier for Youth to Meet With Policymakers

Even the most knowledgeable, well-prepared teens have to deal with logistics, such as transportation, parent permission slips, timing, and chaperones. Experienced youth organizations can help youth (and the policymakers who want to hear from them) work through these issues. Another solution, posed by California Education Secretary Kerry Mazzone, is for policymakers to go to youth. When she served in the Assembly, she established youth advisory committees in her district on various issues. This system enabled her to get youth feedback without asking them to travel. "In one group, all the youth were previous drug users. Maybe a few of them looked a little weird, but what mattered was that they knew more than I did about the subject," said Secretary Mazzone. "Politicians can sometimes be judgmental, but if we don't push those judgments aside they prevent us from doing a good job."

Tips for Policymakers

- **Don't underestimate or patronize youth.** Feel free to ask them the tough questions; you will be surprised how often they know the answers.
- **Don't judge on appearance.** A nose ring or wild hairstyle does not mitigate a young person's ability to think critically about public policies.
- **Don't assume all youth feel the same way.** Just as adults disagree, so do youth. This reality means policymakers must seek advice from a range of young people from different backgrounds (i.e., *not* just student body presidents). Remember to include nontraditional and marginalized youth.
- **Call on youth organizations** such as those listed in the endnotes of this document to find youth who are knowledgeable about your issues.
- **Encourage youth to present solutions,** rather than just problems. Often youth will offer ideas you will not have considered.

Resources

California Statewide Resources

1. *California Adolescent Health Collaborative*, <http://www.californiateenhealth.org/youth/profiles.html>, posts online profiles of 29 agencies involving youth in public policy.
2. *California Center for Civic Participation*, <http://www.californiacenter.org>, provides training and support for youth governance statewide.
3. *California Coalition for Youth*, <http://www.ccyfc.org>, provides information and education, conducts policy advocacy, and offers the California Youth Crisis Line.
4. *California Youth Connections*, <http://www.calyouthconn.org>, works to improve foster care and to educate the public and policymakers about the unique needs of foster care youth.
5. *Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project*, <http://www.clylp.com>, educates youth about leadership, community involvement, and public policy issues.
6. *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, <http://crf-usa.org>, promotes youth civic life through education and training.

California Local and Regional Resources

1. *C-Beyond*, Concord, <http://www.youthec.org>, juvenile justice organization that develops youth leaders.
2. *Community Wellness Partnership*, Pomona, <http://www.pomonayouth.org/index.html>, builds healthy communities through youth leadership development programs and changes public health policies with prevention advocacy efforts and youth violence prevention initiatives.
3. *South Central Youth Empowered Through Action*, Los Angeles, <http://www.ccsapt.org/about/scyea.html>, works on social issues including drugs and alcohol.
4. *Youth Alive*, Oakland, <http://www.youthalive.org>, works on youth violence prevention.
5. *Youth In Focus*, Davis, <http://www.youthinfocus.net>, promotes youth-led research and program evaluation with programs in the Bay Area, Central Valley, and Sierra Nevada.
6. *Youth Making a Change (Y-MAC)*, San Francisco, <http://www.colemanadvocates.org>, works to improve the well-being of San Francisco's children, youth, and their families through policy advocacy, grassroots organizing, and coalition building.
7. *Youth Leadership Institute*, San Francisco and Marin counties, <http://www.yli.org>, provides a wide range of trainings for youth.

National Youth Resources

1. *Arsalyn Foundation*, <http://www.arsalyn.org>
2. *Forum of Youth Investment*, <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org>
3. *Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development*, <http://www.theinnovationcenter.org>
4. *National 4-H Council*, <http://www.fourhcouncil.edu>
5. *National Network for Youth*, <http://www.nn4youth.org/my/shared/home.jsp>

Notes

1. The following people were interviewed for this brief: Amy Dean, Office of California Senator Dede Alpert, September 9, 2002; Delaine Eastin, former California Superintendent of Public Instruction, September 12, 2002; Kim Flores, Office of Senator Jackie Speier, September 11, 2002; Erika Goncalves, former California Board of Education youth member, October 3, 2002; Maura Keaney, i.e. Communications, September 2002; Patricia Marques, Parks, Beaches, and Recreation Department, City of Pacifica, CA, September 10, 2002; Kerry Mazzone, California Secretary of Education, September 18, 2002; Caroline Roberts, Department of Education School Health Connections Program, September 16, 2002; John Vasconcellos, California State Senator, September 19, 2002; and Jim Wilson, California Senate Education Committee staff, September 2002.
2. Observation shared by Jim Wilson, Amy Dean, Kerry Mazzone, and John Vasconcellos.
3. While SB 515 passed both houses of the legislature, it was vetoed by Governor Gray Davis in January 2002.
4. California Adolescent Health Collaborative (2000). *Investing in adolescent health: a social imperative for California's future*. San Francisco, CA: University of California, San Francisco. National Adolescent Health Information Center.
5. Ferber T., & Pittman, K., with Marshall, T. (2002). *State youth policy: Helping all youth to grow up fully prepared and fully engaged*. Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment.
6. Obstacles to student participation in out-of-school activities heightened in 1997 when California SB 727 became law. SB 727 changed policy so that schools were financially penalized for any absence, excused or unexcused. Schools are now penalized for any out-of-school activity—even activities with great merit such as testifying before the legislature—unless a teacher also attends.

Source: The California Wellness Foundation

Teen Pregnancy: A Case Study in Youth-Driven Policy

The California Center's Policy Leadership Program (PLP), conducted in partnership with the California Adolescent Health Collaborative, offers an example of successful youth involvement. The program targets one or more current issues, provides nonpartisan training on those issues to the high school participants, and then creates opportunities for them to advocate whatever positions they have developed as a result of their research. It is important to note that all policy positions are determined by the youth—not the adult organizers.

For the last two years, the program has focused on teen pregnancy.

Youth Develop Policy Priorities

Participants were nominated to participate in the year-long program by community organizations and schools statewide. The California Center selected youth that represented a wide range of experiences and abilities. By recruiting a mix of teens, ranging from those considered at-risk to traditional "youth leaders," the group more accurately represented the views of youth in general. They came to their policy priorities after undergoing a multi-step research process that included

- presentations by and interviews with policymakers, analysts, and service providers representing many sides of the issue (liberals, conservatives, moderates);
- a statewide survey of almost 500 youth (survey topics were determined by PLP youth); and
- online and library research on teen pregnancy policies.

Based on these activities, the youth developed four teen pregnancy priorities (see box inset). It is important to note that the adult directors of the program arranged the training and helped the youth think critically about what they were learning, but the adults did not drive the youths' priorities. Instead, the youth developed their own priorities based on their research and group consensus. It is believed that this autonomy gave the youth additional credibility with policymakers, since they were clearly not "puppets" of adults with an agenda.

Priorities Developed by the 2002 Class of PLP

1. Teens should have access to **comprehensive sexuality education** in school, not abstinence-only.
2. Youth should have access to private and **confidential health care** services.
3. Youth should receive education about **emergency contraception** and how to access it.
4. **Male involvement programs** should remain a priority because they target existing and potential teen dads.

Outcomes: Youth More Skilled and Policymakers Better Informed

Once the youth developed their priorities, they advanced their positions through

- a youth-led televised briefing arranged by the California Center, which was attended by policymakers and other officials;
- policy meetings with legislators and members of the administration;
- community presentations and letters to newspaper editors in their hometowns; and
- media coverage through local and state outlets.

While it is difficult to quantify the outcomes of these efforts (just as it is difficult to track outcomes of adult advocacy), there is good reason to believe the youths' efforts made a difference—both in terms of their advocacy agenda *and* as ambassadors for increased youth participation in policymaking. They made face-to-face contact with at least 100 state and local policymakers and staffers, and they delivered their message to thousands of citizens through the media (combined newspaper and journal circulations of over 500,000 and estimated radio and television audiences of at least 300,000). This year the program continues with a new class of teens who will continue this work.

Intense training such as the PLP prepares teens for a lifetime of civic involvement, and it makes them ideal candidates for providing legislative and committee participation. For additional information on PLP, contact the California Center at (650) 557-9800.

Recommendations

Policymakers, schools, funders, and nonprofits must work together to support the vision of youth participation in policymaking.

Legislators

- Actively include trained youth in the legislative process—during bill drafting and subsequent testimony—especially when pending legislation directly affects young people.
 - The following legislative committees are urged to establish at least one formal youth hearing a year, early in the session, similar to the one held by the Senate Education Committee: Senate Health and Human Services, Assembly Education, Assembly Health, and Assembly Human Services.
 - The Senate Education Committee is urged to diversify its youth hearing by including additional youth groups other than just the California Association of Student Councils. (*See the resources section on page 4 for possible organizations.*)
- Establish informal youth advisory committees in home districts so lawmakers can garner youth feedback while minimizing the need for youth to travel.
- Conduct visits to middle and high schools in legislative districts to educate youth about the process and get their ideas on policies.

Governor, Administration, and Government Agencies

- Create youth seats on boards, commissions, advisory committees, and task forces—ensuring in each case that the youth receive adequate training and staff support.
- Invite youth to participate in policy meetings and get youth feedback on administrative policies under consideration.

Funders

- Prioritize grants for training and on-going support of youth participation in policy.
- Join with policymakers and the nonprofit community to create a nonpartisan youth policy network to (1) help policymakers and youth organizations quickly find each other when youth input is needed, (2) create standards for nonpartisan training and preparation of youth, and (3) improve collaboration among nonprofits statewide.
- Support research and evaluation on the effectiveness of youth participation in policymaking both in terms of policy impacts and youth development values.

Schools

- Set school policies that are flexible enough to excuse students to participate in public policy and service learning.
- Place a higher priority on state and local government education in the classroom. Invite lawmakers to speak to students.

Nonprofits

- Be vocal at state and local levels about the importance of involving youth in the policymaking process.
- Ensure that youth receive adequate training and support on a case-by-case basis or on a program level.
- Invite youth to serve on boards, and provide adequate training and support so the youths' service is effective.



The Center for Health Improvement (CHI),
a health policy center, serves as a catalyst to focus
health policy and health care services on prevention.

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CALIFORNIA C E N T E R

The California Center for Civic Participation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that engages youth in the democratic process and encourages their healthy development. Through its programs, youth become involved in public issues affecting their communities, cities, and state.

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